

October 23, 2011 - Lust and Pure in Heart

I'm going to start with a quiz this morning. So far, I think every lesson we've done in this series, I've started by saying exactly the same thing and so, since this is our fifth one I figure by now, hopefully, you've caught on to it, so I'm going to let you fill in the blanks and see how you do this morning. There is a _____ blank going on. Battle, very good. That was the easy one. You are at the _____ blank of the battle. Center, middle, heart any one of those. You cannot _____ the battle. Avoid, escape, anything like that. Your heart and mind are where the battle is _____. Being fought. Very good. And very similarly, your heart and mind are what are being _____. Fought for. Here's the tricky one. How do you spell mercy? If you don't understand what that was about ask someone who was here last week. They'll fill you in. If you were here last week and don't know what that's all about, ask someone else who was here last week and I'm sure you won't have to go very far to figure out what that's all about.

Our topic this morning has two halves to it. The first half is "Lust". That is a tough, awkward, uncomfortable, topic, for us to cover, particularly in a large group setting. You never want to appear too knowledgeable on this subject as you are addressing it. But this seems to differ some from the other 6 deadly sins, in that, I think more than any of the others, this is the one that we really try to hide when it occurs in our life. More than the others, we feel shameful about lust. More than the others we kind of innately sense that there is something not right about it. All the others we might try to defend or justify or make exceptions for, but lust, we kind of just innately know that, this is just not right. It is the most taboo of the 7 deadly sins. Interestingly enough, Jesus, when He talked about things, He much more often talked about things like greed and hypocrisy and pride much more frequently than He addressed the topic of lust. Cook, in his book says this: "Lust, for Jesus, was neither the most powerful, nor the most lethal of the sins. Lust is not the worst sin, only the most popular." And I think that might be a fairly accurate assessment.

So, as I was preparing this week, and trying to find a way to define and describe lust in a manner that was appropriate for all ages, I finally went to the book that we've been reading and thought C.S. Lewis has a description that I thought is the best place for us to start. Here is what Lewis' description is that Cook quotes in his book. He says "Imagine we have visited an alien world where scores of people have assembled to watch a strip tease. Imagine then, that instead of a woman, a small covered platter is brought out and with all eyes wide, someone slowly removes the lid, revealing a steaming hamburger. And we think this strip tease is a joke but all around us people begin howling and snickering and elbowing their friends. Some just sit, quivering in their seats as they watch."

Now you may think 'Wow, this is remarkable that you may be able to find this picture, (picture of a juicy hamburger) to go along with that story, but actually, this picture comes from a campaign that Burger King ran that was actually called "Whopper Lust" and for one week this summer, Burger King had a channel on Direct T.V., Channel 111, and when you

tuned into Channel 111, all day long you would see this burger. What they wanted you to do was to watch this burger. If you watched this burger turning and flame broiling, for 5 minutes straight you would get a free Whopper. They had little things in there, where every now and then you had to press a certain button on your remote just to make sure that you were there and not cheating and just letting it run. Every five minutes you stood and glared at that Whopper, you would get a free Whopper. And if you did it for ten minutes, you would get two. And if you did it for fifteen minutes you would get three. It would pop up these encouraging messages to you all along that just kind of enticed you to keep watching and how good and how tasty and juicy and warm and yummy and delicious that Whopper was going to be. So, just stare and focus and obsess about this Whopper you are going to get. And as silly as that is, that's a fairly good analogy for what lust prompts us to do.

Lust is that visceral, primal, palpable, craving that we have. It's commonly associated with sex, but it's applied to other things like power and fame and vengeance. It is being ruled and dictated and consumed by those primal urges. Lust suggests that these primal urges spring from a desire that is instinctive to us. It is the instinctive desire to pursue pleasure. Therefore, lust will tell you that ultimate happiness comes from giving ourselves over fully to these desires and therefore, gaining the greatest gratification possible. Now, as I said, good P.G. examples and illustrations are tough to come by and so this morning, I thought what we would do is look at the example of a story out of the Bible. I thought that was the safest route to go. We're going to watch this story of a man named David and how lust works on his heart and how it shapes the decisions he makes. As we go through this story, I want you to notice the progression that lust takes us on, the path that it leads us down. It's fairly consistent and so I want us to look at David's story and see how that might come true in our life. So we begin with the encounter. This is out of 2 Samuel, Chapter 11 if you want to read the story for yourself later.

David is a wealthy, powerful, handsome, important person. He's actually a king back in the Old Testament times. David already has multiple wives and mistresses and no, that's not supposed to happen but he kind of made an exception for himself, being a powerful king you can do those sorts of things. And so David has his wives and his mistresses and one day he's up on the top of his roof and he's looking out over the city and he happens to see a woman named Bathsheba. She's out on her roof top and she is bathing. And the passage says that she is very attractive. David is instantly drawn to her and locked in on her. That's the way lust is. It begins with a seemingly simple and inconsequential event. Just a glimpse. A single sound or a whiff of a certain scent and we're hooked.

As you channel surf and stumble across a bedroom scene on T.V. As you make your internet search on some innocuous topic. I search for a lot of images and I can tell you that it is so very easy to stumble upon some very provocative pictures on some topics that you would never think of it. This week, I was at home, working on my computer and my wife looked over and she said "Oh! What are you looking at?" It was a picture of a nude celebrity on my screen and I could not navigate away from it. I eventually had to shut down my browser. I

booted up my browser again and I did the exact same search and I scrolled down to the thing I searched for and I showed her the line I clicked on. Here is the racy topic that I clicked on. This is what it said “Handy Manny Pumpkin Carvings.” Handy Manny is a children’s cartoon! And it took me to this other website. It’s so easy for us to go from ‘googleing’ to ‘oogleing’ in just a matter of seconds.

You catch a smell of a particularly intoxicating perfume as someone walks by you. You’re just gazing harmlessly, routinely, around the room and somebody, an image a form of a person, catches your eye and captivates your mind. You hear a certain word or phrase spoken in just a slightly suggestive manner. It doesn’t take much and our heartbeat starts to quicken, our senses go into high alert and your passion starts brewing.

Next comes the reaction: David is up there on the rooftop and he catches a glimpse of Bathsheba and it could have ended right there. He could have caught that glimpse of her bathing and gone “Oh, I shouldn’t look at that” and walk away. But that’s not what David does. He stays. He lingers. He watches, he wonders, he dwells, he imagines, he indulges. And that’s how lust works. One quick look can’t really hurt, can it? And one quick look turns into one longer look. Just take a moment and enjoy the thought and the feeling that it brings. Imagining is not the same as actually doing something, right?

Following the reaction comes the pursuit. Now David is up there on the rooftop, I imagine kind of hiding behind one of the pillars or columns so he’s not spotted. He’s watching Bathsheba down there as she takes her bath. But eventually, her bath ends. She gets up out of the bathtub and walks back inside. It could have ended there. But David continues to fantasize, and theorize and rationalize and eventually, just thinking about it is not enough so he enquires “Who is that woman that I happened to see?” He finds out that she is the wife of one of his loyal soldiers who has gone off to war, to fight for him. Receiving that news, it could have ended there. But instead, he invites her over to his palace. I don’t know why he did that. I don’t know what his intentions were. Maybe he just brought her over to flirt a little bit. Maybe it was for the rush of the forbidden for having her come there. Maybe he was just going to wine and dine her a little bit. Maybe he was just trying to get as close to that line as he could without crossing it. Or maybe, he intended all along, to do exactly what he did. You see, lust addicts us to our own thoughts and fantasy’s and passions. We crave more and more. We indulge ourselves more often and more deeply and eventually the desire in our mind is not enough and it needs to become tangible and so we act on our urges and passions and desires. Perhaps dipping in our toes at first or perhaps just diving right in.

The final stage is the after affects. David invites Bathsheba over and he sleeps with her and then sends her home in the morning. Later, Bathsheba sends word to him that she has become pregnant. Now it’s time for the cover-up. David calls Uriah, Bathsheba’s husband home from the battle front. He calls him home and tries to convince him to go home and stay with his wife that night to cover up the fact that David had slept with her. But he finds out the next morning that Uriah had not gone home, he had slept on the steps of the palace with

the guards. David said “Why did you do that? Why didn’t you go home?” and Uriah said “Well, all of my fellow soldiers are still out there on the field and they are cold and they’re hungry and they’re fighting and it’s just not fair for me to go home and enjoy a warm bed and a nice meal and the company of my wife. And so, the next night David invites Uriah over and he gets him drunk. And he thinks “Maybe, if I can get him drunk enough, maybe I can convince him to go home, or at least convince him that he did go home cause he won’t remember.” And so, David get’s him drunk and tries to convince him to go home to his wife and Uriah, again, stays on the steps of the palace with the guards. So, David’s plans for the cover-up has failed. He sends Uriah back to the battle front. He sends with Uriah, a message that he is to give to the Commander. The message to the Commander says “Here’s what I want you to do. Put Uriah on the front lines and when the battle gets to it’s thickest most intense part, pull everyone else back.” So Uriah is left there by himself. So David’s Commander does as he’s been instructed and Uriah is killed.

That’s what lust does. Instead of giving that lasting satisfaction that it promises us, Lust usually is characterized by short-lived pleasure, followed by unending shame and guilt. In the aftermath, we deny our lust to ourselves and to a great extent hide it from all others. Covering up our lustful activities often requires deception and dishonesty; secrecy and separation from all others. Lust is not just a passing thought or a single event. Lust is a subtly seductive, smouldering of passion. It is an ongoing obsession and preoccupation. It is a seed of desire that snowballs from an instinctive urge to an all consuming need. And lust’s power and danger lies in the fact that it does not occur in one glaringly obscene action, but in an almost undetectable, series of incremental impulses. Which is why Jesus cautions His followers in Matthew, Chapter 5:27-30:

“Heard it said ‘Do not commit adultery. But I tell you, anyone who looks at a woman lustfully, has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out. Throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into Hell. If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off. Throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body, than for your whole body to go into Hell.’”

You see, Jesus says, ‘Lust begins in your heart and by the time lust get’s to your hands, it’s likely too late.’ You defend against lust by controlling your thoughts, not your actions. That may seem like severe precautions that Jesus gives. Gouge out your eye. Cut off your hand. And I’ve always read that verse as saying “To prevent you from doing this again, I’m going to gouge out your eye. Cut off your hand.” I always thought of it in the same terms as in those countries where you used to get caught stealing and they would chop off your hand because you were caught stealing. That was the context in which I understood this verse. As I read it more and studied on it more, this is not about radical self-amputations. Jesus has said that the problem is not in your hand or in your eyes. The problem is in your hearts and in your minds. These words are not about the severity of our actions, they are about the severity of the consequences those actions bring. Jesus is suggesting in this verse; if given a choice between losing a body part and the harm and havoc and heartache that lust will inevitably

bring, the smart choice is actually, Option A.

Lust does not only lead to all sorts of complications and undesirable consequences, but it also robs you of the true pleasure your God-given passions were designed to give. Early Christians were against lust and preached against it and taught against it and warned against it, but they did so, not in a way that said passion was bad. In fact, what they said was the exact opposite. They said passion was God-given and blessed and lust is a poor copy of it. They essentially said “Lust is celery.” There’s really not very much to it. It’s kind of substandard, in my opinion. There’s really no flavour, there’s not taste, there’s really no nutritional value. I guess you could live on celery if you needed to, but wouldn’t you much rather have a buffet that had all sorts of healthy things and tasty things and all sorts of things. And they said “The buffet is the passion that God has designed you to have and the celery is the lust that you are creating in yourself.”

When I was younger and would go to camps they always have campfire at night and the most exciting thing for a young boy to do at campfire time was to find some of those dry pine needles. Because if there was a fire and you found a nice big branch of nice dry pine needles, nothing burns like dry pine needles. So, you would have a little bit of a fire there, going, and you would get this big bundle of dry pine needles and you would throw it on and almost instantly the fire would just rage and it would be huge. But it would only last for a second or two and then it would start to die down. If all you had on there was pine needles, very long and you wouldn’t be left with anything but ashes. And lust is like dry pine needles. You can throw it on there and you would get a big flare all at once, but it doesn’t last, it doesn’t turn into anything, and all you’re left with is ash. And God says “there is passion that I’ve designed you to have that is like a roaring bonfire, that’s huge and it’s sustained and it’s magnificent and it’s lasting.”

So, if we are to say that lust is the poor alternative, it’s the poor replacement, then what is it that God suggests to us? In Matthew 5:8, Jesus says:

“Blessed are the pure in heart for they will see God.”

Jesus argues for quality over quantity. Instead of indulging our primal urges and desires at every opportunity we stumble on, God recommends enjoying those passions to their fullest, not squandering them on inferior opportunities. Jesus says “Happiness comes to those whose heart is pure, because a pure heart will be able to see God and will see God in their own life. They will see God in the world around them. They will see God in the people they meet and one day they will see God face-to-face.

Very quickly I want to look at a second story out of the Old Testament. This story, very similar plot lines in a lot of ways but very different in the outcome. This is in Genesis, Chapter 39. This is the story about a man named Joseph and the way Joseph chose to keep his heart pure leads him to a very different reality. The story begins in a very similar way.

Joseph is not a powerful king he's a servant. He's poor and he's had a hard life, but the scripture points out that he is very handsome. He is working for his master and his master's wife, Mrs. Potiphar, tries to seduce him. She is wealthy and she is powerful. She's his boss's wife and even if she lacked the natural beauty she had the means to make herself look attractive and good. And Joseph has had a rough life. He's been rejected and unwanted by most of his family and now, this powerful, influential, lovely, woman, wants him. Initially, Joseph says "No", both to her and himself. And it says "from that day on, he takes off and gets away from her" and that's Joseph's initial reaction to her. And the pursuit comes, but the pursuit is not by Joseph. This time the pursuit is by Mrs. Potiphar. It says "she came after him, day after day after day. And she is relentless. It says that Joseph purposely tried to avoid her and stayed away from her because she was just so relentless in her pursuit. She used every means at her disposal. I imagine she said things like "It's okay. My husband won't care. And besides that, he doesn't need to know. And you know what Joseph, I understand but I'm just so lonely and neglected and I could just use some company right now." Or perhaps "If you don't do what I ask, Joseph, you know that I can make your life really, really, miserable." And he is pursued and hounded and enticed and seduced. He is actually physically forced into a compromising position, where the only way out of it is to slip out of his cloak and run away. And in the end, Joseph insisted on keeping his heart pure and thus, despite Mrs. Potiphar's best efforts to seduce him, he was not lured in.

Well, that's pretty straight forward I guess. However, I imagine many of you know how both of those stories end. Joseph. What does Joseph get for his commitment to purity? Yeah. He get's thrown in jail. That's his reward. I mean, eventually, he is brought out of jail and eventually he does become second in command, second only to Pharaoh in all the land of Egypt, but that's a long road to get there. However, it is his integrity and his pure heart that allow God to eventually put him in a place where he could be used for those great things.

All that to say, as is true of all the Beatitudes, I think, while following God's instructions does give us the best shot for living our lives the way they were designed to be lived, and thus experience the full and abundant and meaningful and joyous happy life that we hope for. We still live in a messed up world with some messed up people who do some really messed up things.

What about David? This is perhaps the more significant point. What does David get for his lust-driven actions? Well, to start out, there are some pretty painful consequences. Uriah is dead. That's a painful consequence and David has to carry the guilt of that for the rest of his life. The child that is born to Bathsheba falls sick and lives for only one week, and this crushes both David and Bathsheba. And this story is recorded and retold for millennia. It has become more well known that the indiscretions of Tiger, or Bill or Arnold or Jesse James or any of the other Hollywood celebrities. On the other hand, David is still considered the greatest and most ideal King Israel has ever had. David is remembered as being a man after God's own heart. How is that possible?

The prophet Nathan, confronts David and shows him exactly how far off track his lust has taken him and David's immediate and heartfelt response is: "I have sinned against the Lord." And Nathan replies, "The Lord has taken away your sin." Which means, if you have been seduced and suckered in by lust; if you have been led astray by your primal passions; if you have been dominated by your desires; if you have consistently caved in to your cravings; despite the fact that this topic is taboo; even if you carry the guilt and the shame; even if you think it is ugly and unforgivable; even if you think there is no hope of breaking the cycle; even if you believe that God has written you off; God forgave David. God healed David and God used David and God restored David to a relationship. Not because of who David is but because of who God is. And God will do the very same for you. Not because of who you are, but because of who He is.

Maybe lust has been a struggle for you in the past. Maybe you have fought with that for some time. Or maybe, it's not lust, maybe it's that idea of keeping a pure heart. And a pure heart not just from lust but from things like envy and jealousy and pride. Pure from bitterness or resentment or arrogance. Whether it is the struggle fighting off lust or the struggle keeping a pure heart, I believe that every morning we should start with the words from Psalm 51:9-12 that Brad read us this morning as a reminder to us of what God has promised each and every one. The Psalmist says:

"Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity. Create in me a pure heart, Oh God and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me away from Your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of Your salvation and grant me a willing spirit to sustain me."

And God will. Not because of who you are. Not because of what you've done. But, simply because of who He is.